

# Law and justice council presses for sales tax

By Kristi Pihl, Herald staff writer

Franklin County has a pressing need for the revenue a criminal justice sales tax would provide.

After reaching that conclusion Friday, the county's law and justice council agreed to ask Franklin County commissioners Wednesday to put a 0.3 percent criminal justice sales tax measure on the November ballot.

The county would use its 60 percent share of the tax to build a 2,500-square-foot addition to the jail and remodel the current jail, said Sheriff Richard Lathim. The addition's second floor would house the sheriff's office and Pasco Municipal Court.

The jail's problems have become more severe since a 2009 ballot measure failed, Lathim said. Its roof is deteriorating, which would cost \$500,000 to fix.

The jail, built for about 100 prisoners, now averages about 197 each day.

Pasco's municipal court is in the county courthouse, but the city's 40-year lease of that space expires in May 2012, and county departments need more space.

It's important to have the city court located near the other courts, Lathim said. Otherwise, the city would face extra costs to transport prisoners, and it could create delays because many prisoners face charges in multiple courts.

County Prosecutor Shawn Sant suggested using some of the sales tax revenue for juvenile justice, saying the proposal then would have a better chance of passing.

The bicounty juvenile justice center only has enough staff to operate 35 of the 50 beds in the facility. Sant said releasing kids early or telling them they have to wait to serve their time can make penalties less effective.

But Lathim said the 0.3 percent tax barely would cover a new jail. And residents already pay a 0.1 percent sales tax for juvenile justice, which was used to build the juvenile justice center.

Lathim said he also is concerned that adding juvenile justice to the proposal would dilute it, which happened with the first criminal justice sales tax proposal that voters turned down. So far, the tax has failed twice.

The cities would receive 40 percent of the tax revenue, apportioned by population, to use for their law and justice needs, Lathim said.

With the 2009 proposal, Pasco would have used its money to pay for municipal court space and a police station, said City Manager Gary Crutchfield.

Pasco's police department is out of space, he said. Building a separate police station next to city hall would solve that and open up space for other city hall needs.

Crutchfield said he thinks there should be an effort to look at options before putting a measure on the ballot.

Voters in Pasco School District boundaries already will be asked to support a \$59 million bond in the April 26 election, Crutchfield said.

That measure would cost homeowners 95 cents per \$1,000 of assessed value, or \$95 for a \$100,000 home.

The money would pay the local share of costs for a new elementary school, middle school and an early learning center.

Pasco Councilman Bob Hoffmann asked about temporarily housing prisoners in Benton County's jail.

But Lathim said housing 50 prisoners there would cost \$1 million a year, and there isn't money for that.

No matter what is done, Lathim said additional revenue is needed.

Hoffmann said he's not sure if the majority of the Pasco City Council would favor running a ballot measure now.

Jail Capt. Rick Long said community leadership must enthusiastically support the measure for it to succeed.

Connell Police Chief Michael Kessler said Connell has done everything it can short of raising fees and taxes and now must either find more revenue or cut services.

Connell Mayor Gary Walton said a sales tax is more equitable because everyone will pay it, not just property owners.

Connell could use its share to pay for a sixth police officer, a position cut after it was held vacant, or help pay for patrol vehicles, said Steve Taylor, city administrator.

A 0.3 percent sales tax likely would bring in about \$2.7 million a year, with almost \$1.6 million going to Franklin County.

County Administrator Fred Bowen said that if the county proceeds with the proposal, it will need to develop a plan for the jail remodel and addition that can be built within the \$16 million the sales tax could fund.

Motorized farm equipment and motor vehicles are not included in the sales tax, Bowen said.

Todd Samuel of Pasco said he has heard concerns that there hasn't been enough investment in law enforcement to keep up with the county's growth.

The area's economic vitality is contingent on people feeling like Franklin County is a safe community, he said.

"We've got to make this a priority; otherwise we are going to be a Yakima," he said.

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